La Revista

SPECIAL EDITION: Tourism & Travel

Feliz Navidad

Cheese making in Cantabria

smooth, sweet, bitter, buttery and melts in the mouth

Travel

Gorgeous Galicia is one of Green Spain’s best-kept secrets

Book

The history and culture of Madrid
El libro de las horas contadas
by José María Merino

A member of the Real Academia Española, José María Merino is best known for his short stories. Within this genre he has also cultivated the microcuento or short-short story. El libro de las horas contadas (Alfaguara, 2011) [The Book of Numbered Hours] is his latest and most innovative contribution to Spanish microfiction.

The collection brings together 73 stories ranging in length from one to nine pages—and varying in form from a tale told in a single sentence to a miniature novel that comprises more than a dozen “chapters”. The book’s title exploits the dual meaning of contar: to enumerate and to narrate, to count and to recount. It also plays on the set phrase tener las horas contadas (as in, “tiene las horas contadas”: his days are numbered).

This idiom encapsulates the circumstances of the book’s main, authorial character, Pedro, who finds his own days to be numbered as he faces major surgery and a grim prognosis. With a heightened sense of mortality, he redoubles his activities as a writer in the time he has left, recording his whimsical fictions—the stories that comprise El libro de las horas contadas. The book, then, is at once a novel and an anthology of microcuentos. Each story can be read separately as a discrete narrative or in relation to the others in the collection. Here are two of them and their translations:

MALETAS AGRESIVAS
Descubro por fin mi maleta: con la cinta roja que le he puesto para identificarla mejor, desciende por el canal que la depositaré en la cinta transportadora. Pegada a ella hay una maleta marrón más grande, y me parece que, en el momento de llegar a la cinta, hay entre ellas cierto forcejeo, como si la maleta mayor hubiese atacado a la mía, que se tambalea antes de quedar postrada. Cuando la recojo, observo en uno de sus laterales las señales de un gran mordisco. Indignado, sigo el camino de la maleta grande y descubro que la recoge un tipo gordo, de rostro sanguíneo. Me acerco a él.

—Su maleta ha mordido a la mía—le digo, conteniendo en lo posible mi furor.

El tipo me mira torvo.

—¿Puede usted demostrarlo?—responde, antes de darme despectivamente la espalda y alejarse.

¿Qué hacer en estos casos? Sentirse como yo, rabioso e indefenso.

AGGRESSIVE SUITCASES
At last I find my suitcase. With the red ribbon I tied to it so as to find it more easily among the others, it is coming down the chute that will pass it to the conveyer belt. A larger, brown suitcase is right beside mine, and just as they reach the conveyer, it seems to me there is some kind of scuffle between them, as if the larger suitcase had assaulted my own, which wobbles slightly before falling face down. When I retrieve it, I notice large bite marks on one of its sides. Outraged, I follow the big suitcase and see a fat, red-faced guy pick it up. I approach him.

“Your suitcase bit my suitcase,” I tell him, trying to keep my rage in check. The guy gives me a baleful look.

“Prove it,” he replies before turning his back on me contemptuously and walking away.

What to do in such situations? Feel as I do: exasperated and helpless.

CON RETRASO
Con los años descubrió que las noticias de los periódicos le resultaban menos alarmantes y desazadoras si las leía con retraso, una vez transcurridas algunas jornadas desde su publicación. Fue así como, al encontrarse su propia esquina en la página de decesos, comprendió que había fallecido cinco días antes.

BELATED
With the passing years, she discovered that the news in the daily papers seemed less alarming and upsetting if she read them a few days late, after their initial publication. Thus it was, when she came across the announce-
ment of her own death among the obituaries, she realised she had passed away five days earlier.

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